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Recommended Citation

Zhao, Nancy, "Autonomy and Gender in Music Training: Classical Music Education in First-and Second-Generation Chinese Immigrants of St. Louis" (2018). *Spring 2018*. 143.

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AUTONOMY AND GENDER IN MUSIC TRAINING: CLASSICAL MUSIC EDUCATION IN FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION CHINESE IMMIGRANTS OF ST. LOUIS

Nancy Zhao

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Scholarly and non-scholarly literature often presents a one-dimensional image of Chinese immigrant families, one in which the first-generation parents have high expectations and the second-generation children lack autonomy. While these narratives praise these immigrants for their “perfect” integration into American society, they nonetheless neglect the complexities of the Chinese American experience, ultimately perpetuating the formation of certain stereotypes related to the “model minority” status. One of these aspects is the overrepresentation of second-generation immigrant Chinese children in the classical music realm. This study examines the rising trend of classical music training in the Chinese population of St. Louis. Research topics include the reasons behind the popularity of extensive Western classical music education in these families and the consequences affecting the acculturation process of these immigrants. Data gathered from ethnographic interviews and surveys show that unlike scholarly and non-scholarly literature portrayals of Chinese immigrant families, the children possess a certain degree of autonomy in their music training. Moreover, parents have different expectations in music training for their sons and daughters, which becomes evident in the transition period from middle to high school. Although both the parents and children are aware of the involvement of the Chinese community in the classical music arena, they still willingly participate in the practice. Yet, despite the huge investment in Western classical music education, parents still desire for their children to seek career options in STEM. Music is generally viewed as a mandatory hobby rather than a plausible career path. Instead of merely being a component of the immigrant lifestyle, classical music education is a crucial aspect of individual identity and pride. There lies a deeper irony in this established tradition of classical music training without any noticeable benefits to the family.